The Nixon Watch

Signals to Mao

On February 1, 1969, his twelfth day in office, Mr. Nixon sent a note to Henry Kissinger. The President said that his assistant for national security affairs should explore every means of developing friendly relations with Communist China and should tell East European Communists with whom Kissinger was in touch that this was a very serious purpose of the new administration. Nothing was said about passing the word to Peking, but that of course was the point.

So began what the President, in this year's edition of his annual foreign policy review, called "the movement toward normal relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China." It has been a slow movement, too slow for those critics who hold that the US and not the Peking government is principally responsible for the hostility that has prevailed since the Communists took over mainland China in 1949. But there is a rationale for the pace of Mr. Nixon's effort to encourage some movement and lately to hasten it a bit. Because the rationale will continue to govern the Administration's actions and responses to Peking's actions, no matter what the critics in Congress and elsewhere may say, it is set forth here as it was explained to me last week at the White House and State Department.

The guiding rule is that the American government should do nothing and propose nothing that could invite an explicit rebuff from Peking. The rule arose from a review of China policy that the President ordered four days after he sent the note to Kissinger and that he discussed with the National Security Council on the following May 15. It was a prescription for minimal disturbance of domestic opinion and for minimal political risk, calling as it did for cautious and minor steps toward accommodation that were no more likely to arouse either opposition or public enthusiasm at home than they were to draw an immediate response from Peking. But something more than that must be said for the rule of caution. It was rooted in a judgment that the Peking government would move on its own initiative to improve relations with the US, or respond to American moves toward that end, only when and if such a move or response was considered in Peking to be absolutely necessary and in the vital interest of the People's Republic. In the view thus adopted, the most that the US should try to accomplish was to convince the Peking Communists that, when and if they deemed a favorable move or response to be in their essential interest, the Nixon administration would welcome any sign that they did and would respond within the limits of what it considered to be American necessities and interest.

There followed, beginning in June of 1969, the gradual relaxations of US curbs upon trade with China and travel to China that preceded Peking's invitation to the American table tennis players and Chou En-lai's remark that "a new page" in Chinese-American relations had been turned. This series of Nixon actions had a rather odd history. A long list of actions that the Administration might take without risking the feared rebuff was completed by an interagency study group on July 17, 1969. It included, at least in outline, all of the gestures that have been made since then, including the ones announced by the President on April 14. The most substantial of these, a partial lifting of the embargo on exports to and imports from China, was based upon a list of nonstrategic export items that was compiled for the President last November. A decision as to the items to be allowed and not allowed for export without special license could have been made and the complex regulations implementing the choices could have been drafted at any time since then. But the choices had not been made and the regulations had not been drafted when Mr. Nixon announced the concessions in principle. Similarly, the regulations that will determine how many dollars can be remitted to China for what purposes, in accordance with another of the latest concessions, had not been thought out and prepared. The bureaucracies at State, Commerce and Treasury were at work on the regulations last week. Until they are completed and approved by the President, nobody can know how much the concessions really amount to.

What they amount to is not, in the White House and State Department view, terribly important. Like the earlier gestures, they are understood to be token actions – signals that the Nixon administration is ready to get down to serious business whenever the Peking government is ready. The important thing, in the Nixon view, is that with its tennis invitation and the admission of a few American correspondents to mainland China the Peking government has signaled back its conclusion, for its own reasons and in its own interest, that a "movement toward normal relations" is in order. By definition, normal relations must in the end require the admission of the People's Republic to the United Nations and diplomatic recognition of the Peking government by the United States. By the generally accepted definition, normal relations in this sense cannot be accomplished until and unless the US is prepared to dump Chiang Kai-shek's "Republic of China" and hand its island home, Taiwan, over to the Chinese Communists. Mr. Nixon is still saying that he will never do that. Peking is still saying that he must. So Mr. Nixon appears to be hooked.

But is he? The hope at the White House, verging upon confident belief, is that he isn't hooked. Or, that, if he is for the moment, the same play of forces and national interest that has led to the current turn toward accommodation will get him off the China hook. Put in simpler fashion than it is put at the White

House and State Department, the Nixon hope is that the Peking government will be induced and the Taiwan government will be compelled to resolve their seemingly irreconcilable differences and arrive on their own at the "China solution" of China's problem that many critics of the Administration have advocated.

The basic judgment that Peking would move toward accommodation with the United States only when the Chinese Communists consider accommodation to be essential for them enters importantly into the Nixon calculation. If, the official reasoning runs, the Peking government considers accommodation essential enough to seek or welcome it at all, it must be prepared to pay some price for it. A corollary conclusion is that the worst mistake the US government could make at this point would be to offer the accommodation free of charge. This is why the Administration opposes and predictably will continue to oppose such Senate resolutions as George McGovern's, calling upon the Administration to acknowledge forthwith that the People's Republic is "the sole legitimate government of China" and support its admission to the UN. Why not, the Nixon argument goes, wait at least long enough to find out whether Peking, in return for a developing accommodation with the US, may be willing to set aside the Taiwan issue for a while or perhaps (as Sinologist Doak Barnett has suggested) accept a government restricted to Taiwan as an autonomous affiliate of the People's Republic?

The Administration is closer to a drastic alteration of its relationship with and support of the Taiwan government than is commonly realized. At a press conference on January 29, Secretary of State Rogers was asked whether it is "a fair inference" that the Administration no longer considers the Taiwan government to be the legitimate government of all China. Rogers replied that he would not question the inference. In the President's February foreign policy review, the People's Republic is synonymous with "China." Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China is synonymous only with Taiwan. In the section of the review dealing with China relations, the President said that "while I cannot foretell the ultimate resolution of the differences between Taipei (Taiwan's capital) and Peking, we believe these differences must be resolved by peaceful means." It was Mr. Nixon's coded way of agreeing with Senator McGovern that "the future status of Taiwan" must eventually be left "to a peaceful resolution by the people on both sides of the Taiwan Straits."

At the President's order, Henry Kissinger late last year conducted intensive interagency studies of the issues and problems connected with the diplomatic recognition of the Peking government and with its surely approaching admission to the UN. The studies have been completed. What they recommend and what Mr. Nixon will decide after reviewing the findings is unknown. But the fact that they were ordered is sign enough of the President's recognition that Asia is changing and that US policy must change with it.

Vice President Agnew provided another sign of impending change last week. He griped to a supposedly off-record assemblage of reporters that he was unhappy with and had opposed the trend away from unqualified American support of Taiwan. For the first time since he and Mr. Nixon took office, the White House staff made it known that the President was unhappy with his Vice President's performance.

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